



Taft

BULLETIN

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SPRING 2025

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ON THE COVER
Reporter Susannah Walden '06 on an assignment in Ukraine, near Bakhmut in Donetsk, in January 2023. Walden is the bureau chief in Kabul, Afghanistan, for global news service Agence France-Presse. See our feature “The Conflict Reporter,” on page 40 of this issue.

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CORRECTIONS
We apologize for the incorrect photo caption in the Winter issue's 1993 class notes on page 75. Corrected caption for center photo: A.J. Mleczo Griswold '93 with the children of Amanda Costanzo McGovern '93 at A.J.'s annual charity event on Nantucket.

On
MAIN HALL

A WORD WITH HEAD OF
SCHOOL PETER BECKER '95

The Second Quarter
of the 21st Century

WOULD YOUR 16-YEAR-OLD SELF BE SURPRISED BY YOUR PRESENT SELF? Would you be surprised by how the next quarter century unfolded, both for you and for the world? For me, the answers are: yes, yes, and yes!

The start of 2025 provides an important opportunity to take stock and get some perspective. We just started the second quarter of the 21st century. When I shared this with students in January, cognizant that the entire student body was born during the century's first quarter, I pointed out a few (mostly American-centric) examples of how much happened in this relatively short period of time.

In the year 2000, Tom Brady graduated from college and the Patriots had never won a Super Bowl. Taylor Swift was 11. Kendrick Lamar was 13. Mark Zuckerberg was just starting his first year at Exeter. Google was 18 months old. Elon Musk was (briefly) CEO of PayPal after his company X.com merged with Confinity. Netflix was not yet 3 and delivered DVDs to your mailbox (streaming wouldn't arrive for seven years; most of our current students have never heard of Blockbuster Video). Napster (the earliest music-sharing and streaming service) was new and illegal. Uber was nine years from inception. The Red Sox hadn't won a World Series since 1918, and the Yankees had already won 25. Donald Trump ran for president as part of the Reform Party, and that year's election was ultimately decided by the Supreme Court.

This audience knows as much as or more than I do about how the next 25 years played out, both in this country and around the world. Our current students, however, have the same perspective on the century's first quarter as I had about the last quarter of the 20th century when I was a student—in other words, not very much. For most of them, 9/11 happened before they were born, and the wars that followed are distant memories. They didn't experience the whiplash of Bush-Obama-Trump-Biden-Trump. They don't know a life before the combination of smartphones (iPhone born 2007), social media, hacked attention, and the instant gratification of Amazon, DoorDash, and streaming. They didn't experience the 2008



“It is our responsibility to ensure that Taft prepares students for change, disruption, and unpredictability, and the related expansion of digital technologies, [which] include equipping students to take the long view, both by looking back and looking ahead.”

“I shared with students that as we think together about the next quarter-century, we have far more control over the type of people we become than over almost any other outcome.”

financial crisis. For our current students, #MeToo and BLM have always existed. COVID was a seminal part of their youth. I struggle to think of a parallel to the pandemic from my generation.

It is our responsibility to ensure that Taft prepares students for change, disruption, and unpredictability, and the related expansion of digital technologies. One step in that preparation includes equipping students to take the long view, both by looking back and looking ahead. (The discipline of history will be as important in the next 25 years as preparation in science and math.) We adults should do the same. As I shared with students, most of the major events of the last 25 years were not in our individual control. Contingency is real, and life is unpredictable—on an individual scale, an institutional scale, and on the world stage. It’s incumbent on Taft to prepare students for volatility—certainly through good classroom teaching, but also through non-classroom experiences that stretch students and require them to work as teams, take risks, and make decisions with real consequences.

We do have control over how we plan and the questions we ask. The strategic planning process that Taft began last September provides the opportunity to reevaluate the outcomes we want for every student. One emerging theme in this process is the power of simply requiring students to set goals of various kinds—academic and extracurricular, as well as goals related to character and the formation of healthy habits of mind, body, and spirit—track their own progress, ask for feedback, and reflect on the results. Similarly, strategic planning and long-term campus planning provide the school the opportunity to ask questions about where we would like to see Taft three, five, 10, and even 50 years from now. We are envisioning Taft’s program and culture, the physical plant and infrastructure systems, the endowment, alumni engagement, and our relationship to Watertown and the surrounding region, just to name a few of the most obvious categories. What may not be a realistic goal for 2030 could certainly become possible over a longer time horizon as long as we set the goal, track our progress, and reevaluate along the way.

Finally, I shared with students that as we think together about the next quarter-century, we have far more control over the type of people we become than over almost any other outcome. Taft has *always* cared more about the development of a student’s character than any other part of a student’s life, often despite the unrelenting pressure to prioritize things like grades and college outcomes. Our students, faculty, alumni, and parents have echoed this concern about character through surveys and conversations: Taft’s community—and being a person who contributes positively to it—stand out as most important. The strategy emerging from the planning work this year keeps the development of character, community, and an orientation to service at the center. To prepare students holistically for a future fractured by algorithm-fueled tribalism, Taft must constantly attend to the unique advantages provided by boarding schools: attracting students from diverse backgrounds and equipping them to live well together. The community we all prize—what the writer Derek Thompson calls “the village” in his important *Atlantic* article titled “The Anti-Social Century”—is the best training ground available in high school to prepare Tafties to enter the world capable of making a positive difference. “The village,” Thompson writes, “is our best arena for practicing productive disagreement and compromise—in other words, democracy.”

Sixteen-year-old Peter Becker was *very much* a work in progress. I take great comfort in the fact that there is always room for improvement! And I am inspired every day that as proud as I am of the Taft I attended, Taft today is even better—and I trust that, working together, we will make the Taft of 2050 an even more extraordinary place for students to live, learn, and grow.

Peter Becker

Peter Becker '95

“Taft has *always* cared more about the development of a student’s character than any other part of a student’s life, often despite the unrelenting pressure to prioritize things like grades and college outcomes.”



Vocabularies of Design

Architect Michael S. Wu '73
at his desk in Locust,
New Jersey KATE KETCHEM



Above: Front elevation view of Fox Knoll,
a New Jersey home designed by architect
Michael S. Wu '73 MIKE VAN TASSEL

Right: The main staircase at Fox Knoll.
MIKE VAN TASSEL

MODERN HOMES built on tradition—that's how architect Michael S. Wu '73 characterizes his design philosophy. But really, he says, "My style is no style. Every house is different, and I like it when I can use different vocabularies. I think it's much more interesting to take different attitudes along the way, rather than doing the same thing over and over again." In the four decades since he established his New Jersey-based firm, Wu estimates that he and his team have designed and built upwards of 200 homes, establishing an impressive track record that recently earned him a spot on *Forbes's* list of America's Top 200 Residential Architects for 2025.



"My style is no style. Every house is different, and I like it when I can use different vocabularies. I think it's much more interesting to take different attitudes along the way, rather than doing the same thing over and over again."

“I’ve been really fortunate to work with clients who are smart, who query a lot, and who really want to be involved in the process. I always tell them that this is like a bespoke suit. It’s custom. Anything they want, we can do.”

Right: A hallway at Fox Knoll
MIKE VAN TASSEL

Below: Cedar Points, a shingle-style home designed by Wu
MSWU ARCHITECT



Inspired by his father, who began his career as a mechanical engineer and personally restored his Vermont farmhouse, and his uncle, an architect, Wu pursued a degree from Carnegie Mellon University before moving to Manhattan to complete his apprenticeship at the prominent firm Marcel Breuer & Associates.

His talent for design was evident from the very beginning of his career. Over the next two and a half years, Wu completely reimagined the interior of his SoHo loft, cooking meals on a camp stove before the kitchen was finished. Just a few years after he sold it, the apartment stood in



as Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore’s home in the hit 1990 film *Ghost*.

None of Wu’s subsequent projects have yet to wind up on the silver screen, but he may prefer it that way. “I like to keep things on a small scale,” he says. “I decided to focus on houses, rather than big corporate [projects], because I never wanted to be so removed from the work that I was just running the office. I’ve always enjoyed the design aspect of architecture, and I liked working on houses because it meant that I could get involved in every aspect of the project—sometimes even down to the toilet-paper holders!” Not that there’s anything wrong with toilet-paper holders: “I actually like to do bathrooms,” he laughs, “because it’s fun to create a luxurious space that is also very efficient.”

After an initial meeting with the client, each new project begins in the same place—the bookstore. Whether it’s for a Dutch Colonial or a classic shingle-style house, Wu scours the shelves for research materials. And where other architects may design a home in a matter of weeks,

he often devotes up to six months to a single residence, consulting with the future homeowners every two weeks.

From the outside, Wu’s houses may look as if they were built centuries ago, but as he explains, on the inside “the actual organization is modern. In a traditional home, the rooms are organized as rooms. But the interiors of many of the houses I work on are much more open, so instead of a dining room, you have a dining area.” Ultimately, he understands that what truly makes a house a home is his client’s satisfaction. And he’s proud to say that, after 42 years, “I’ve been really fortunate to work with clients who are smart, who query a lot, and who really want to be involved in the process. I always tell them that this is like a bespoke suit. It’s custom. Anything they want, we can do.” ■

—Christopher Browner ’12

Above: Wu’s first home located at 94 Mercer Street in Soho, New York City, which he designed and built after graduating from Carnegie Mellon University. The loft was featured in the movie *Ghost* and was the inspiration for the sets.





Learning from Cancer Patients

CANCER RESEARCH can be slow, cumbersome, and contradictory. Clinical trials can sometimes be expensive, exclusionary and inadequate for real-world populations.

Enter Flatiron Health, whose CEO is Carolyn Starrett '98. Founded in 2012, Flatiron Health has created the leading U.S. source for real-world cancer data. Its experts collect, anonymize, and organize clinical, genomic, and other data for research, based on patients' electronic medical records. Over 280 community cancer clinics in the U.S. use Flatiron's OncoCloud™ platform and services. Flatiron also works with top academic cancer centers, leading developers of cancer treatments, researchers, and regulators in the U.S. and around the world.

"We work with scientists, companies, researchers, and regulatory bodies," Starrett says. Flatiron curates the data that comes from routine care in patients' electronic

medical records to help drug developers spot potential areas for new research, or for fine-tuning a medication if real-life problems emerge. Personal information is stripped from the patient data, in compliance with federal patient privacy laws.

Starrett says Flatiron uses data and technology to help accelerate approval of and access to cancer therapies for people navigating a cancer diagnosis. They work with researchers and doctors across the cancer care system to make clinical trials faster and more inclusive, use real-world data to drive research, and support doctors in choosing the best treatments for their patients. Flatiron's mission is to learn from every person with cancer and use that knowledge to transform cancer care, she says.

Such work naturally involves reams of data, and Starrett, who majored in English at Brown University after graduating from



"In my work, it's about smarter decisions and better insights to advance the development of new therapies and personalize treatments for cancer patients. But in every aspect of my life, data sits behind my decisions and how I navigate my day."

Above: Flatiron's All Hands event in 2023, when employees gathered at their headquarters in NYC to reflect on the past year and to look ahead

Inset: Carolyn Starrett '98, CEO of Flatiron Health

Taft, might not seem a likely candidate to head such a data-oriented company.

"I've always been someone fascinated by problem solving," she says. "I saw very early in my career the transformative [possibility] of data. I was attracted to the problems data could solve."

Such as developing ways to mine electronic medical records for actual experiences patients were dealing with so that therapies could be fine-tuned, expanded, or discontinued.

"Data—and data science in particular—has the potential to transform how we experience the world," Starrett says. "In my work, it's about smarter decisions and better insights to advance the development of new therapies and personalize treatments for cancer patients. But in every aspect of my life, data sits behind my decisions and how I navigate my day—whether it be as simple as where to go for dinner and how to get there, or as broad

as where to invest my time and energy."

She was drawn to working at Flatiron because it was an opportunity to work with "incredible people on a mission that really matters—to learn from the experience of every person with cancer."

Over the next few years, Starrett says Flatiron will delve more deeply into generative AI to analyze data in order to seek out promising areas for research and development of new cancer-fighting therapies, not just in the United States, but also internationally in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan, where Flatiron has expanded its operations over the last three years.

Looking at the landscape today, there are many core problems that still persist, Starrett says.

"It still takes over 10 years to bring new oncology treatments and therapies to market. Clinical trials are expensive, inefficient, and slow. They don't really represent the patients who might ultimately receive

and benefit from those medicines."

Using Flatiron data, physicians and researchers can spot trends in therapies that can inform treatment plans. With instinctive workflows, up-to-date treatment guidelines, and actionable data, Flatiron helps cancer centers and community oncologists improve the patient experience, while also streamlining operations and improving revenue by providing information about real-world experiences.

"Our mission has always been to improve and extend lives of people with cancer. The health care journey is deeply frustrating," she says. "We've seen miraculous advances. For 12 years, Flatiron Health has been part of the core of understanding real-world data and informing treatment and drug development. We are closing the gap between research and the care people actually receive." ■

—Bonnie Blackburn-Penhollow '84



Starrett at one of Flatiron's Everyone@, an all-company meeting where teams across the business share updates

Natural Helper

"It's about parents seeing their kids in a different light. My goal is to shift their lenses."



WHEN JOSH CARPENTER '80 was 10 years old, he found a box of reel-to-reel audio tapes in his father's office. His father was a clinical psychologist who specialized in working with troubled boys. The tapes were conversations he recorded as part of his dissertation. Carpenter started playing them and was instantly transfixed.

"I was just amazed to hear this guy that I knew as 'dad' be incredibly more patient and kind and thoughtful with these kids, who were clearly young boys my age," Carpenter says. "I'm not saying he was impatient with me, but he was a dad with me."

His father found him listening to the tapes and took them away, lecturing him about confidentiality. But the elder Carpenter was amused by his son's interest. He made a subtle effort to encourage him, often talking about work at the dinner table. "These weren't Ward and June Cleaver dinners," Carpenter says.

These conversations left a deep imprint on the empathetic Carpenter. He went on to become a psychologist who has dedicated his life to working with adolescents. "What makes it a good fit is that teenagers take no prisoners," Carpenter says.



Above: Josh Carpenter '80 with a longtime client and a longtime colead on a snowy elk hunt in northern New Mexico this past fall

Left: Carpenter, after coleading and concluding an elk hunt with clients, heading out of high camp with two packs strapped together for the journey, along with their gear and elk

"You have to be emotionally congruent, and you have to be who you are. From a young age, I knew who I was."

Growing up in New Hampshire's White Mountains, Carpenter developed a love for hiking and hunting. While the broad strokes of his career may resemble his father's, Carpenter has forged his own path as a pioneer of wilderness psychology, a therapeutic approach combining outdoor experiences with traditional counseling. "I realized that I'm so much healthier when I'm outside," Carpenter says. "I wanted to find a way to combine that with psychology."

Carpenter and his wife live in Craftsbury, Vermont, where he spends winters skiing and coaching Special Olympics athletes. Their two chest freezers are packed with wild game from therapeutic wilderness adventures, such as elk hunting in New Mexico and salmon fishing in Alaska, where Carpenter lives on his boat during summers.

Carpenter credits his two years at Taft with deepening his appreciation for nature. After getting cut from the varsity soccer team, faculty member Eric Drake,

who ran an outdoor program, asked if he had any interest in hiking. Carpenter lit up. Drake and teacher Ted Heavenrich (for whitewater kayaking) were "two very competent and giving mentors of wilderness experience for me at Taft," Carpenter says. "[They] introduced me to outdoor adventuring. I never looked back."

At Taft, Carpenter also sharpened his commitment to helping others. "I was that guy who hung out with the kids who were quietly having a hard time," he says. "They called it 'being a natural helper.' The truth was that I had a lot of great adult role models who treated me like a person instead of talking down to me. They took me seriously,

so I could talk about serious stuff."

This is the same approach Carpenter uses with his clients. When he works with a child, he also works with the child's entire family, a unique method that has yielded impressive results. During candid conversations, no topic is off limits. "I'm an advocate for the family system," Carpenter says. "I'm going to talk to everyone. And once they realize I'm not talking smack about anybody, everyone feels good about it because they realize I just want everyone to win. That's all I want. I want the system to get stronger."

Carpenter attributes much of



his success to time spent with clients outside the office on a trail or in a boat, in pursuit of game or fish. Time spent outside is central to his work. "Hands are busy and yet minds can wander, and the most recalcitrant kids turn into talkers," Carpenter says. For him, the most rewarding moments come when parents share these adventures and see their children confidently showcasing new skills, like butchering a deer or setting a fishing lure.

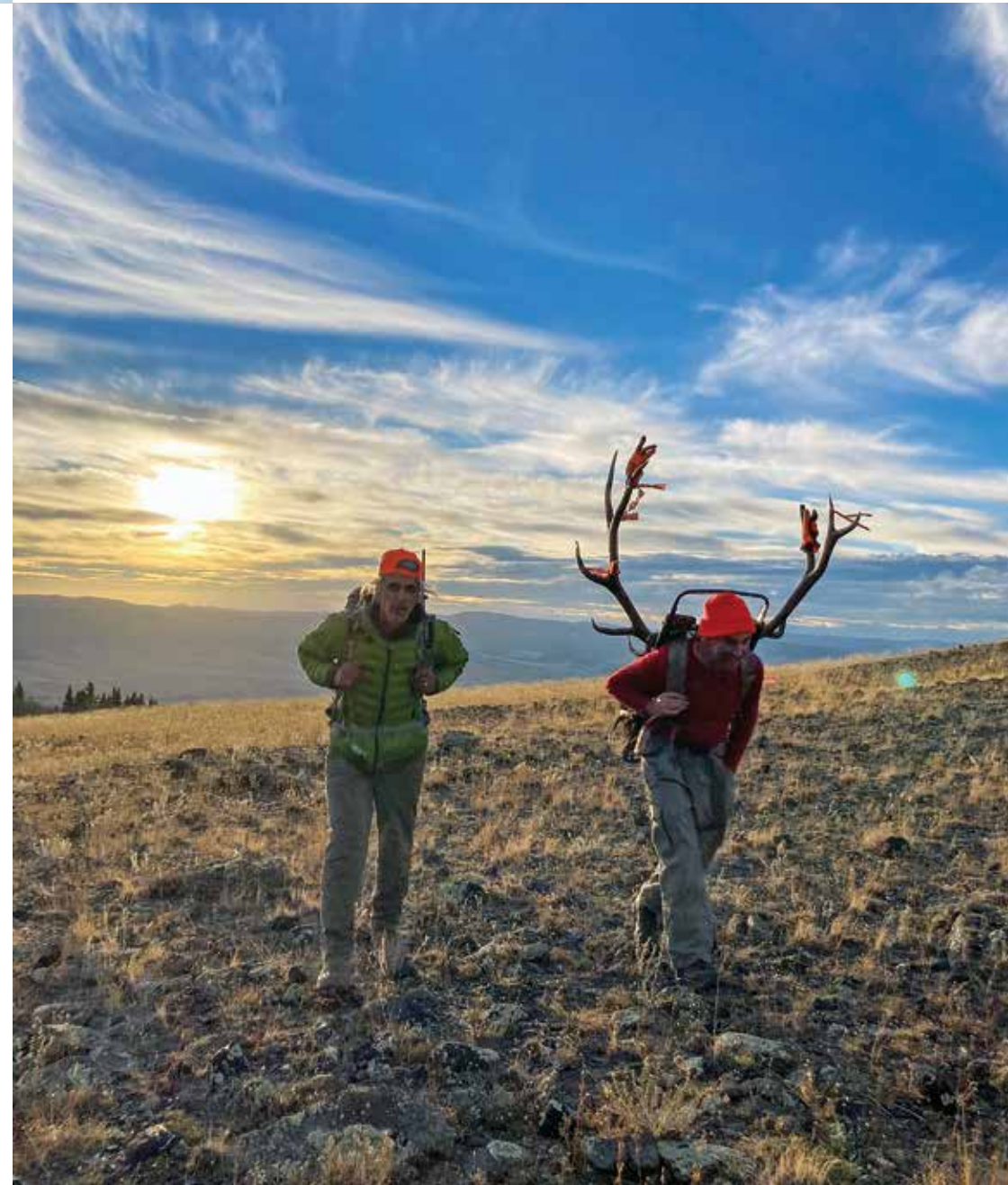
"It's about parents seeing their kids in a different light," Carpenter says. "My goal is to shift their lenses."

Recently, Carpenter has devoted more time to mentoring younger wilderness therapists. "I feel like I'm in the youth of my elderhood," he says. "I don't need to make a lot of money. I just want to influence and empower as many young women and men as I can." In doing so, he is passing the torch and ensuring that the next generation is equipped to carry this important work forward into the wild. ■

—Elliott Grover

Above: Carpenter with a pair of king salmon caught off the coast of Sitka, Alaska, aboard his boat, *Miss Adventure*, during a trip guiding clients on a wilderness therapy adventure

Left: Carpenter and his colead on a public land hunt in northern New Mexico, after a long day of moving a harvested bull elk's parts back to base camp at 10,000 feet several miles away



Entertainment Icons & Living Legends

Barry Clarke '08, vice president of business development at Authentic Brands Group for its portfolio of entertainment IP

BARRY CLARKE '08 is in his sixth year at Authentic Brands Group, the world's largest sports and entertainment licensing company. As vice president of business development, Clarke pinpoints strategic brand partnerships, endorsements, collaborations, and licensing deals for Authentic's impressive roster of entertainment intellectual property (IP), which includes living legends Shaquille O'Neal, David Beckham, and Allen Iverson, as well as the estates of Muhammad Ali, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley, among others.

"Authentic has a unique model, which is essentially agents and managers coming together under one roof," Clarke shares of the company, which has over 50 brands in its portfolio. "It means that we're partnered with our living legends on everything they do, in perpetuity. It's not as volatile as an agency business."

Before joining Authentic, Clarke—who is based in Los Angeles—worked as an executive in brand consulting at Creative Artists Agency (CAA). In 2016, while at CAA, they partnered their Oreo client with Shaquille O'Neal for a commercial campaign, which introduced Clarke to O'Neal's agent, Colin Smeeton. Fast forward to 2019, Smeeton joined Authentic to lead business development for the company's entertainment IP portfolio—including O'Neal, who had been an Authentic shareholder for several years at that point—and Smeeton recruited Clarke to come on board with him.

"Colin was looking for people with a brand consulting background who were interested in moving to the other side of the table to do deals with brands for Authentic's portfolio," Clarke explains. "It was the perfect pivot for me, as that was the kind of work I'd always wanted to do."

Entertainment is one half of the business, and the other half is lifestyle. "We're trying to replicate that lifestyle half of the model as much as we can on the entertainment side when it comes to our licensing strategy," Clarke says. For example, Authentic helped O'Neal create his own line of gummy candies, called Shaq-A-Licious, as well as his own line of

furniture for the company Rooms To Go.

"A third part of our strategy is to identify collaborations for smaller-type capsules," Clarke says. "My job is to find the deals and execute those deals alongside my brand and legal teams. Then the brand team brings them to life."

As for representing the estates of past icons, Clarke and his team work diligently to help honor those legacies and keep them alive. Clarke recently closed a deal for an ad campaign with Muhammad Ali's estate and Lucid Motors, and with Elvis Presley's estate and Hilton Hotels.

"I love being able to think creatively on behalf of brands and icons that I've always cared about," says Clarke. "I also get excited to work with talent on building their business so that they begin to see themselves

as brands earlier on in their career."

He says that it can be challenging to work with legacy brands, as it's not always easy to keep them skewing to a younger audience. Juicy Couture, for example, is a name in Authentic's portfolio with a particularly nostalgic image, in addition to Roxy, Reebok, and Nautica. "We're continuing to reeducate audiences on our brands by reintroducing them to pop culture through partnership," Clarke says. "We always want to make sure that our brands maintain cultural relevance." ■

—Carola Lovering Crane '07

Below: Barry Clarke '08, far right, poses with Shaquille O'Neal and several colleagues from Authentic Brand Group's LA office in a holiday party photo booth in NYC in 2023.





Using high resolution GPS, Côté measures the elevation at a project site in a channel, which is full during high tides, but is dry during low tides. The project involves many private homes, which experience extensive coastal flooding during extreme high tides and weather events.



Above: Jessica Côté '89, owner of Blue Coast Engineering, which provides coastal engineering and restoration services in Washington state

Coastal Restoration

JESSICA CÔTÉ'S '89 work restoring the beaches and pocket estuaries of the Puget Sound sometimes requires her to get outdoors at odd hours. She recently spent a winter evening surveying a beach at low tide—and loving every minute.

"Yes, it's winter, and yes, it's cold, but it was beautiful," Côté recalls. "The stars were out, and I just find magic in these places that I visit."

Côté's Seattle-area coastal engineering business, Blue Coast Engineering LLC, partners with nonprofits, parks, and other landowners to remove old coastal infrastructure, such as seawalls and tide gates, and replace it with natural materials that prevent erosion and flooding while providing a haven for fish and other wildlife.

"We design things that are working with nature, as opposed to working against it," Côté says.

Côté grew up near Lake George, in upstate New York, and has always enjoyed being in and around water. She graduated from Tufts with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. She had a general idea that she wanted an engineering job that involved the ocean.

"I quickly realized that I wasn't going to be able to sit at a desk all the time," Côté says. "I've always loved being outside."

She didn't yet know that coastal and ocean engineering was a profession. But after doing some research at a local library, she realized the specialty would be a great fit.

Côté went on to earn a master's degree

in coastal and ocean engineering from Oregon State University. She worked for the U.S. Geological Survey and then for a series of engineering consulting firms.

"I did very exciting, very cool work," Côté says of her work at one large firm. "I worked in the Arctic, I worked in Peru, I worked in Tanzania—all these amazing places."

But she eventually realized she'd rather restore coastal areas near Seattle, where she lives with her husband and teenage daughter. "I was feeling kind of disconnected from my community," she says.

Côté founded Blue Coast Engineering seven years ago and now has a business partner and eight employees. Her team's work ranges from small beach restoration projects to restoring salt marshes

converted to farm land decades ago.

Team members begin by studying an area, analyzing everything from wave patterns to sediment movement. Then they draw up plans to restore the area using materials such as boulders, wood, sand, and plants, as well as carefully positioned channels.

Côté says the most challenging part of her job is winning over skeptical local residents.

Pushback to coastal restoration projects can get political and ugly, she says, as people resist changes to beloved beaches and parks. "We try to do, early and often, outreach to get ahead of it before people start making up their own narratives and stories."

Her team ultimately aims to improve coastal areas for people, plants, and wildlife. That's what makes the work rewarding, Côté says. "There's a lot of gratification in the fact that I'm really trying to do good for this Earth." ■

—Sophie Quinton '06



Côté teaches property owners about coastal processes and how they interact with beach sediments seasonally and annually to change the shoreline. Hard armoring of shorelines disrupts these processes and causes an increase in erosion, as opposed to decreasing erosion rates.



Côté's company, Blue Coast Engineering, was contracted by a regional organization set up to protect, restore, and enhance salmonid resources in Washington. Côté, on right, was the engineer on the project to design the removal of 770 feet of creosote timber wall on the shoreline, reconnect two miles of a freshwater stream, and create a two-acre pocket estuary for juvenile salmon and other wildlife.

Below: Côté stands on the deck of a vessel deploying a wave gauge in Puget Sound to measure wind waves during winter storm events to understand how waves will affect a project site and design.



Around THE POND

BY DEBRA MEYERS
For more information,
visit www.taftschoo.org/news



Legacy

A Sweeping and Personal Journey

TAFT'S 2025 THREE-DAY COMMEMORATION OF THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. WAS A SWEEPING AND PERSONAL JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY.

A Personal Journey

Thomas Allen, dean of community, justice, and belonging, opened Taft's MLK commemoration with a talk on legacy—the oppression that called for revolution and Dr. King's leadership. Allen shared the story of his grandmother, Gladys Marie "GG" Gray, born in 1925 in the Jim Crow South. She walked miles to attend segregated schools, worked on a farm, and

made clothes from potato sacks. In 1943, she left North Carolina for Philadelphia, where she met Allen's grandfather. In 1963, she boarded a bus to Washington, D.C., where she stood among thousands at the Lincoln Memorial as Dr. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. "I would argue that everyone who was there is a part of Dr. King's legacy," Allen said, before Taft students sang "We Shall Overcome."



^ Scan the QR code above to watch Thomas Allen's full "Legacy" talk.



The Legacy Six, from left, Xander Chatterjee, Isaac Obeng, Ny'Ana Hauser, Jabari King, Teni Arole, Sophie Brown

The Legacy Six

Guided by Allen and faculty members Caitlin Hincker and Samuel Rosario, six Taft students traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, last fall to visit The Legacy Sites: the Legacy Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park. These spaces, created by the Equal Justice Initiative, address the legacy of slavery, lynching, and segregation. Taft's Legacy Six—Teni Arole '26, Sophie Brown '25, Xander Chatterjee '25, Ny'Ana Hauser '25, Jabari King '26, and Isaac Obeng '26—also visited Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church and Kelly Ingram Park. Deeply moved, they shared reflections during a Morning Meeting talk introducing Taft's Legacy Museum.

Reflections

"We immersed ourselves in the powerful history that comes with being in those Legacy spaces. The trip was filled with learning, thinking, reflecting, and leaning into both the ugly and the beauty of what history holds, and how it has evolved into what we see in the present day."—Sophie

The 16th Street Baptist Church

"On a stone inside of the church there is a quote that says, 'They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.' To know that decades later I'd be standing in the same spot fighting for the same thing was truly humbling."—Ny'Ana

Kelly Ingram Park

"There was and still is an unspoken power in the freeze frames of history captured in the sculptures spread throughout the park. The choice to have each person frozen in a vulnerable position, whether kneeling or in evident fear, was impactful in that it made us see and feel exactly how people felt in that time."—Isaac

The Legacy Museum

"At the end of the museum there was a very powerful quote by Mary McLeod Bethune: 'If we have the courage and tenacity of our forebears, who stood firmly like a rock against the lash of slavery, we shall find a way to do for our day what they did for theirs.'"—Jabari



Scan the QR code to the right to watch the Legacy Six's talk. >



The 16th Street Baptist Church



Kelly Ingram Park



The National Memorial for Peace and Justice



The group visits the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice

“One can read and hear about such events, but it is an entirely different experience when you feel the true weight of it.”—Teni

Freedom Monument Sculpture Park

“Each sculpture represented the power, the strength, and also the struggle of enslaved America.”—Xander

Taft’s Own Legacy Museum

As part of the observance of MLK Day, Taft’s Legacy Six students created a Legacy Museum on campus to bring their learning from Alabama to Watertown.

At its heart, the Taft Legacy Museum experience was a transformative walk through Taft’s halls, briefly turned into a living history museum. Sounds of ocean waves evoked the ominous feeling of boarding a slave ship bound for The Middle Passage. Visitors encountered a recreated slave market, historical

photographs, lynching headlines, Jim Crow laws, and a haunting mile-long walk through 800 hanging caskets engraved with the names of 4,400 Black victims of racial terror lynchings from 1877 to 1950.

Taft students, faculty, and staff were guided by student docents from Taft’s Legacy Six. Their studies and travels, including visits to the Legacy Museum and 16th Street Baptist Church, inspired the exhibit. “Our goal was to create an experience that would replicate the feelings we had while visiting the Legacy Sites,” explained Legacy Six member

Teni Arole ’26. “We wanted to share the legacy and the history of African Americans, from the transatlantic slave trade, the domestic slave trade, the Reconstruction Era, the lynching era, incarceration, and Martin Luther King. The power of history is telling the truth, no matter what it looks like.”

Scan the QR code to the right to learn more and to see Taft’s Legacy Museum. >



Immersive Learning

The Arts at Taft

WORKS BY SCULPTOR DIEGO ESPAILLAT filled the Mark W. Potter Gallery throughout the fall term. His show, *Eating the Whole World*, featured complex and colorful papier-mâché sculptures, which provided an inspiring backdrop for a series of hands-on open sessions for Taft students.

Born and raised in New York City, Espailat participates in the artistic traditions of both his home and his Caribbean heritage, placing great value on craft and community engagement. His work and community projects often incorporate the laborious papier-mâché mask-making process he learned from artisans in the Dominican Republic and reflect narratives around objects and genealogical fictions.

During his residency, Taft students were invited to work alongside Espailat in the gallery, where they learned papier-mâché

techniques and crafted a rhinoceros mask.

A graduate from Lyme Academy of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut, Espailat currently lives and works in New York City. His shows have included a solo exhibition, *Cada Cabeza Es un Mundo*, at the Flux Factory, Long Island City, New York, and group shows at New York’s Calderón Gallery, the New World School of the Arts at Miami Dade College, and 98 Orchard, in New York.

This spring, the gallery will feature works by alumna Eileen Mooney ’96. Her show runs April 9–May 10.

“Painting from perception implies an artist’s ‘point of view,’ but the objects and the landscape are already there, whether I am there or not,” Mooney told the *Bulletin*. I, this painter that I am, am here, witnessing them, and my paintings express this moment of witnessing—of being—on canvas.” ■



Peter and the Starcatcher

IF YOU THINK THERE'S MORE TO CAPTAIN HOOK AND TINKERBELL THAN MEETS THE EYE, YOU'RE RIGHT. THEY ARE AMONG THE CLASSIC CHARACTERS FROM J.M. BARRIE'S *PETER PAN*—ALONG WITH PETER AND MRS. DARLING—WHOSE BACKSTORIES WERE TOLD IN THE 2004 NOVEL, *PETER AND THE STARCATCHER*. THE BOOK CAME TO LIFE ON THE BINGHAM AUDITORIUM STAGE IN A STUNNING PRODUCTION MARKED BY SPECTACULAR PERFORMANCES.



Education for Life

An Enduring Foundation

FOR DECADES, TAFT’S MORNING MEETING PROGRAM HAS PROVIDED A SINGULAR AND SIGNATURE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS. BY BRINGING GLOBAL AUTHORS, ARTISTS, SCIENTISTS, EDUCATORS, ATHLETES, PUBLIC FIGURES, FIELD PIONEERS, AND EXPERIENTIAL LEADERS TO CAMPUS TO SHARE THEIR PERSONAL STORIES, TAFT STUDENTS HAVE EXPANDED THEIR KNOWLEDGE, GROWN EMOTIONALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY, AND EMBRACED NEW IDEAS, PHILOSOPHIES, AND PERSPECTIVES WITH COMPASSION AND UNDERSTANDING.

THE MORNING MEETING PROGRAM OFFERS, IN PART, A FOUNDATION FOR A COMPANION PROGRAM, THE NEW TAFT TALKS SPEAKER SERIES. THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, SERIES GUESTS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF A COMMON GUIDING QUESTION: HOW DO WE KNOW ANOTHER PERSON? HERE IS A LOOK AT JUST A FEW OF THE 2024–25 PROGRAMS TO DATE.

Morning Meeting Talks

Taft alumni made triumphant returns to Bingham Auditorium, this time from the other side of the stage.

1 Dr. Thomas Gross '69

In 2023, Dr. Thomas Gross, a retired colonel in the United States Air Force, visited Taft for Veterans Day, when he shared reflections on a life of service and extraordinary achievement—achievement that did not come easy. During his return visit this year, Dr. Gross said that his life as a Taft student was challenging, due largely to his inability to focus his mind. Many years later, things began to change when he discovered an effective tool for taming his thoughts,

calming his mind, and focusing his attention: meditation. Dr. Gross cited studies showing changes in the brain that occur during meditation and reported physical manifestations he experienced once he began to meditate. These experiences served him well while working in emergency rooms and in the field during Operation Iraqi Freedom, as a physician, a partner, and even as a musician. He encouraged Taft students to investigate the benefits of meditation.



“One morning, after I had been practicing meditation for 10 or 15 years, I found myself in a new place,” Dr. Gross recalled. “I couldn’t feel the weight of my body in the chair or my hands in my lap. My mind went to a place of no color, no light, no sound. A place that I can only describe in retrospect as the absence of negativity. It was a place of pure happiness.”

2 Lt. Cmdr. Keefe W. Rafferty '10

A few years ago, U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Keefe W. Rafferty '10 spoke to the Taft community via video from his naval ship, which was then docked in Hawaii, about his life of service. This year, Rafferty traveled to Taft’s campus to reflect on his time at Taft, his experience in the Navy, and what service means in both his life and in the broader community.

“The concept of service has many forms and meanings,” Rafferty noted. “I would offer that it is centered on the pursuit of selflessness: putting others before self—a lifestyle of ‘Not to be served but to serve.’ It is the mindset and outward actions that reflect a servant leader—someone who takes responsibility not only for their actions, but for those around them.”

Servant leadership, Rafferty said, isn’t limited to military service; it can be a part of any career field. There is no greater calling in life, noted Rafferty, than service.



3 Andy Isaacson '94

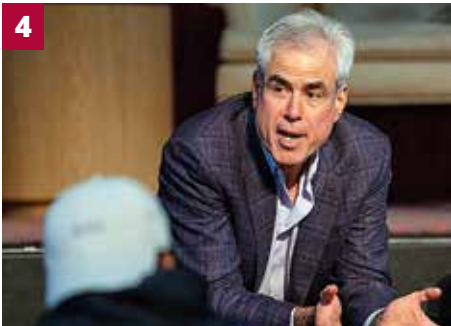
Journalist, educator, and producer Andy Isaacson '94 talked about his work with Shared_Studios, which brings together diverse voices from around the world for transformative dialogues on a range of intractable global issues through an immersive and popular technological innovation known as Portals.

“Portals allow people to express themselves through performance and play. They bring people together who would otherwise never meet,” Isaacson explained. “Think about the society we could create if people made more of an effort to have face-to-face conversations with people from different experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds. Doing so isn’t just personally rewarding; it fosters connection, reduces division, and creates stronger, more compassionate communities. I believe it is how we can create a more just, equitable, and inclusive society.”

Taft Talks Speaker Series

4 Jonathan Haidt

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* is at once a scientific study, a cautionary tale, and a roadmap for effecting meaningful change in children’s



6 Chloé Valdary

Writer and entrepreneur Chloé Valdary shared with Taft her Theory of Enchantment, an innovative framework for compassionate antiracism that combines social emotional learning, character development, and interpersonal growth as tools for leadership development.

“What does it mean to be human?” Valdary asked. “It is a condition filled with complexity and mystery. There is lightness and darkness within each of us. We are at once flawed and flawless. And while there are parts of ourselves that we do not know (and may never fully know), we can each work to bring harmony to the full complexities of being human. We can work toward spiritual integration; toward a state of enchantment that will lead not only to personal harmony, but to a more harmonious society.”

5 David Brooks

Journalist, author, and professional and political commentator David Brooks visited Taft to mine the messaging in his most recent book and Taft’s all-school summer read, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*.

“Ask questions that get you into a zone of trust, then go deeper,” Brooks told Taft students. “What is this chapter in your life about? What are your dreams and fears? What would you do if you weren’t afraid? What I learned as a foreign correspondent is that sometimes in journalism, the goal is not to evangelize or convert everyone, but simply to understand. Ask people how they came to their beliefs; what experiences led them to this place. There are boundaries—racism, antisemitism for example—and you don’t have to agree, you just need to get where they’re coming from. The world is a big place; before you judge it, you have to understand it.”



Connections

TAFT IS FORTUNATE TO HAVE TREMENDOUS RESOURCES IN ITS ALUMNI COMMUNITY, SERVICE PARTNERS, AND LOCAL AND REGIONAL ACADEMIC, SERVICE, AND BUSINESS INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS. LEVERAGING THESE RELATIONSHIPS ALLOWS TAFT STUDENTS TO ENGAGE, CONNECT, EXPERIENCE, IMAGINE, SERVE, AND GROW.

1
Scientific Research Symposium

Taft hosted an environmental research symposium in conjunction with long-time community partner Flanders Nature Center & Land Trust. The program, now

in its second year, featured presentations by environmental scientists and researchers from Yale University, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and Audubon Connecticut and New York. “This was an opportunity for Taft students to see the results of scientists conducting work in local environments,” said Taft science teacher Michael McAloon, “and in several cases, learn how they might get involved with this local research.” Topics included forest bird habitat management, migratory bird research, climate change and vector-borne diseases, forest conservation, vernal pools, and more.

2
Global Research Institute

Cohort XI of the Taft-Waterbury Global Leadership Institute traveled to Waterbury, Connecticut, to explore environmental issues, leadership, and solutions at the former Anamet Manufacturing property. The 17-acre site was part of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Brownfields Program, which provides grants and technical



assistance to communities, states, tribes, and others to assess, safely clean up, and sustainably reuse contaminated properties. They also visited Brass City Harvest, a valued Taft service partner and nonprofit organization founded in 2007 as a way to use the concept of urban agriculture to build self-reliance skills in the community, empower residents to modify their dietary behaviors, and increase fresh food access points in our community.

3
Dr. Kristofer Bagdasarian '97

Taft’s Medical Society and Public Health Club joined forces to bring vascular surgeon and Taft alumnus Dr. Kristofer Bagdasarian '97 to campus for an evening program. Dr. Bagdasarian is board-certified in both general surgery and vascular surgery and is a Fellow of the American



College of Surgeons. He has particular interest in endovascular treatment of both abdominal and thoracic aortic aneurysms, as well as carotid artery surgery and treatment of peripheral arterial disease. “Dr. Bagdasarian shared his inspiring journey to medicine and presented fascinating case studies,” noted Public Health Club co-founder Fiona Chou '25. “The students who attended were deeply engaged and found his insights incredibly valuable.” Fiona also had the opportunity to shadow Dr. Bagdasarian at Saint Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut, where she observed three surgeries—a femorofemoral bypass and two carotid endarterectomies.

4
Elevating the Arts

Student filmmakers from New York University’s storied Tisch School of the Arts invited Taft students to participate in their production of *Cross Checked*, a film about a women’s hockey team. Heather Dawson’s Intro to Film and Advanced Film students were invited behind the scenes to learn more about film production from the NYU filmmakers. Tafties were invited to participate as extras in the film, which shot a number of scenes on campus.

5
Jay Harris

The proximity of ESPN’s world headquarters allows Taft students to learn more about television production, sports journalism, and sports entertainment. Taft’s Athletics Reporting Club welcomed ESPN’s Jay Harris to campus to share the story of his journey from temporary weekend sports reporter

in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to anchoring ESPN’s flagship program, *SportsCenter*. He has also hosted *Outside the Lines*, *NFL Live*, *Baseball Tonight*, and NBA Finals coverage, and contributed to earning multiple *SportsCenter* Emmy Awards. Harris is a recipient of a Silver World Medal from the



New York Festival Awards, a Robert L. Vann Award from the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation, and an EXCEL Award from the Hampton Roads Black Media Professionals.

6
Astronomy

Astronomy Club members traveled to the John J. McCarthy Observatory in New Milford, Connecticut, for a “star party.” The group studied the night sky through the telescopes at the state-of-the-art educational and research facility, and learned about recent astronomical events, including the solar geomagnetic storms producing multiple aurorae borealis events. ■



Dance!

THE ANNUAL DANCE SHOWCASE FELT LIKE A CELEBRATION FOR THE HEART AS STUDENT DANCERS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS FILLED THE STAGE WITH UNBRIDLED JOY AND PURE TALENT.



Fall SPORTS wrap-up

BY SEAMUS F. CONWAY
Photography by Robert Falcetti



Boys' Soccer

17-3-1

NEPSAC CLASS A
CHAMPIONS, FOUNDERS
LEAGUE CHAMPIONS

Preston Alessio '25 puts the ball
on goal against Northfield Mount
Hermon in the NEPSAC Class A
Quarterfinal on November 13.



Boys' Soccer Crowned NEPSAC Class A Champions

IN NOVEMBER, BOYS' SOCCER was crowned NEPSAC Class A champions as they defeated Milton 2-1 in a rematch of last year's final, in which the Rhinos fell 2-0. Along with clinching the NEPSAC Class A championship—the first in school history—the team also claimed the Founders League title for the second straight season (their fourth in the last five seasons), finishing with an 17-3-1 overall record on the year. ■



Field Hockey

15-4

NEPSAC CLASS A
RUNNER-UP, FOUNDERS
LEAGUE CO-CHAMPIONS

Field hockey faced off against Andover for the second straight season in the NEPSAC Class A championship, earning a spot in this year's final after two great victories in the quarter and semifinal matchups, a 5-0 victory over Deerfield, and a thrilling 1-0 overtime win over Hotchkiss. The girls fought hard until the very end, before eventually falling 2-0 to the Big Blue. The team finished the season with an impressive overall record of 15-4, a share of the Founders League title, and as the NEPSAC Class A runner-up.

Caroline Traina '26 heads up the field
against Deerfield in the NEPSAC Class A
Quarterfinal on November 13.

Girls' Cross Country

6-1

FOURTH PLACE, FOUNDERS
LEAGUE TOURNAMENT;
12TH PLACE, NEPSTA
DIVISION I CHAMPIONSHIP

Charlotte Murphy '25 took home
both the individual title for the
Founders League tournament
(18:26) as well as the NEPSTA
Division I Championship (18:02).

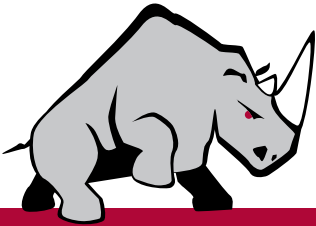
Charlotte Murphy '25 heads towards the finish
line during the Founders League Tournament
on her way to claiming the Founders League
individual title on November 2. WILLIAM YANG '26



Football

3-5

Calvin Kulik '25 turns
the corner and heads
up field against Loomis
on September 21.
YUQI QIAN '27



FALL 2024 ATHLETIC AWARDS

Boys' Soccer

Livingston Carroll Soccer Award—
Joaquín Mañón '25
*All-NEPSAC—*Preston Alessio '25
(Player of the Year),
Ethan Marquis '25,
Marcos Santana '26
NEPSAC Honorable Mention—
Vincent Levasseur '26,
Mathis Elissaint '26

**Boys' Cross
Country**

*John B. Small Boys' Cross Country
Award—*Tate Celebi '25,
Rory McNamara '25

Girls' Soccer

1976 Girls' Soccer Award—
Renata Mercedes '25

Football

Black Cup Award—
Brady Winter '25
Harry K. Cross Football Award—
Ben Bazarian '25

**Girls' Cross
Country**

Girls' Cross Country Award—
Charlotte Murphy '25

Volleyball

Volleyball Award—
Alexie Blake '25



Boys' Cross Country

3-3

THIRD PLACE, FOUNDERS
LEAGUE TOURNAMENT;
10TH PLACE, NEPSTA
DIVISION I CHAMPIONSHIP

Tate Celebi '25 placed second
overall in the Founders League race
with a finishing time of 16:43, and
placed 20th in the NEPSTA Division
I Championship, highest of any
Taft runner with a time of 16:49.

Will Post '26 races down the home stretch
in the Founders League Tournament
on November 2. YUQI QIAN '27



Girls' Soccer

10-5-1

Renata Mercedes '25
in game action against
Suffield on September 18

Volleyball

4-11

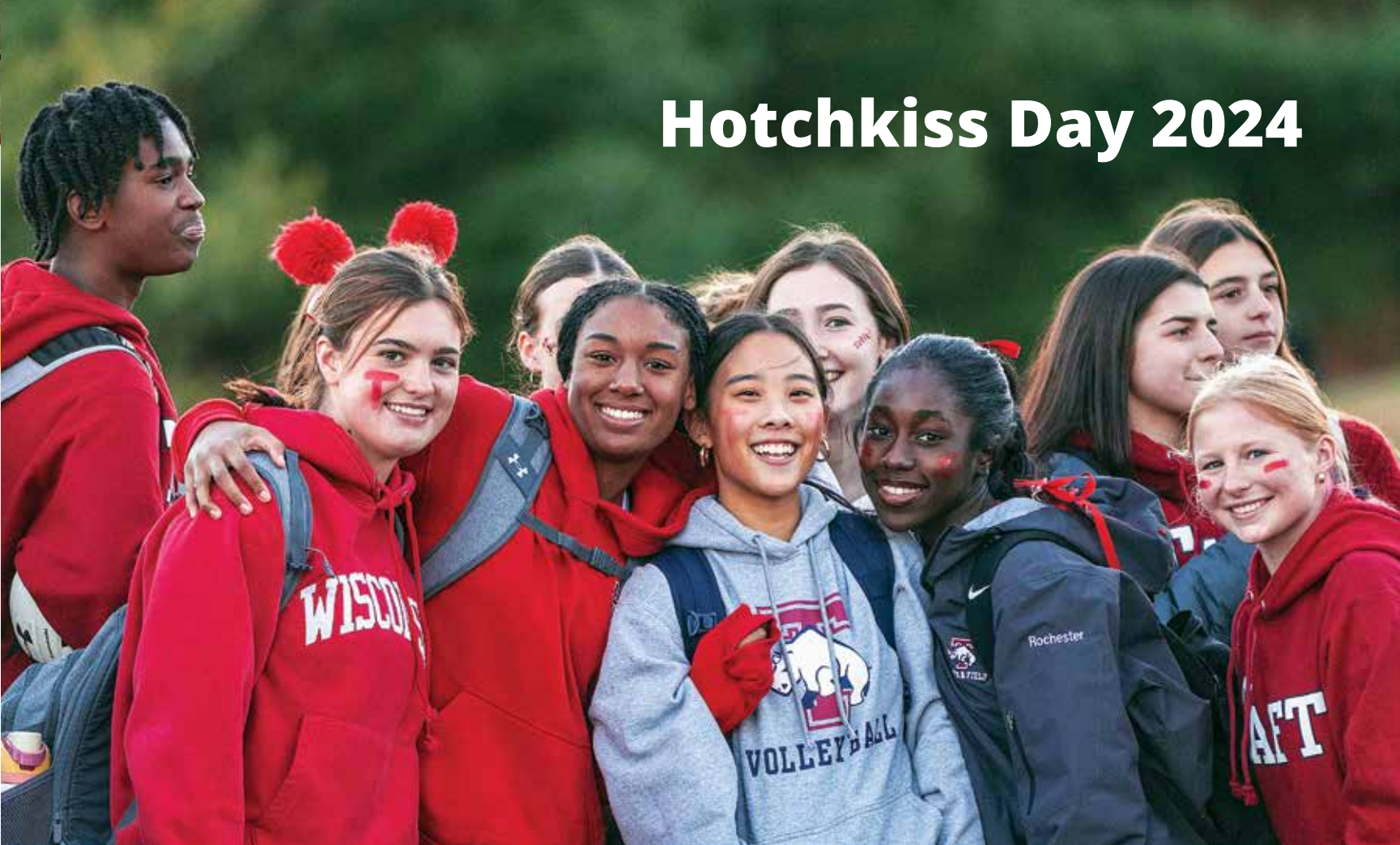
Maddy Little '26 digs the
ball to stave off a point
against Kingswood Oxford
on September 11.





41st Annual Patsy K. Odden Girls' Invitational Hockey Tournament

THE 41ST ANNUAL PATSY K. ODDEN Girls' Invitational Hockey Tournament took place on Thursday, December 19 and Friday, December 20. The teams that competed in this year's tournament were Taft, Andover, Choate, Hotchkiss, Kent, Lawrenceville, Loomis, and Tabor. After two full days of games, Loomis and Andover faced off in the championship game, with Loomis taking home the tournament title. ■



Hotchkiss Day 2024

D'Arco Cup

IN EARLY DECEMBER, six bus loads of Rhino fans (approximately 250 students!) traveled north for this year's Lucille A. D'Arco Cup game hosted by Berkshire School. Lucille was a passionate fan and supporter of both schools: Her son, Brad '99, captained the Taft team as a student, then went on to coach the Berkshire team after college. In 2008, Lucille lost a courageous battle with breast cancer. Since then, the two schools have honored her legacy on the ice in a game dedicated to her memory, to raising funds and awareness around breast cancer, and to commemorating the D'Arco family's involvement with and love for both institutions. While the Rhinos fell to Berkshire 5-1, the game was a powerful reminder of the connections that bring our schools together and the enduring impact of Lucille's legacy. ■



BERKSHIRE SCHOOL

On the final day of the fall season, the Bearcats rolled in to town to take on the Rhinos during this year's Hotchkiss Day. Taft came out on top over Hotchkiss, winning three out of five varsity matchups—football pulled off a comeback as the team scored a touchdown in the final minute of the game to go ahead 21-19, boys' soccer won in convincing fashion by a score of 7-1, and girls' soccer captured a victory over Hotchkiss with a final score of 3-2. Field hockey and volleyball both fell to the Bearcats, with field hockey losing a hard-fought 3-2 game in overtime, and volleyball falling 3-0 in straight sets.



YUQI QIAN '27



WILLIAM YANG '26



WILLIAM YANG '26



THE CONFLICT Reporter

**Susannah
Walden '06**

confronts challenges and
shares stories with the world
as Kabul bureau chief for
Agence France-Presse.

BY ZACH SCHONBRUN '05

WALDEN HAS MADE A CAREER RUNNING TO PLACES
IN THE WORLD THAT OTHERS WOULD GLADLY FLEE
FROM, TO SHARE STORIES ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH.



It was, for all intents and purposes, a dream assignment for Susannah Walden '06. She started working in Washington, D.C., in 2021, a stone's throw from the White House, covering the Biden administration for the global news service Agence France-Presse (AFP).

It was her first time back living in the United States in 15 years. The newsroom was abuzz with activity and excitement at every bit of news coming in.

"People were standing up and shouting across the room, 'We're alerting this, alert this!'" Walden explains.

Then a war broke out in Ukraine. When AFP asked for volunteers to cover what was happening at the front lines, Walden raised her hand. Walden was no stranger to international conflict.

Currently, she is the AFP's bureau chief in Kabul, Afghanistan, covering the radical upheaval taking place since the Taliban rose again to power in 2021.



Opposite page: Susannah Walden '06 next to a destroyed bridge in Donetsk, Ukraine, after reporting on a Ukrainian tank brigade

Above: Walden on assignment for AFP at the White House covering a visit by Colombian President Gustavo Petro in spring 2023

Left: Walden on assignment in the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan reporting on child malnutrition

Walden in the city of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in autumn 2024, overlooking the hollows once filled by the ancient Buddha statues that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001

She lives and works with 23 others in a guarded compound with razor wire along the perimeter and bars on the windows. Talking via Zoom from Germany, where she took a holiday in November, she chooses her words carefully. Most of her daily energy, she says, is spent worrying about the “what ifs” for her reporters attempting to cover life in a police state.

Adding to the unease, she is a woman in a country notoriously restrictive to women. But then Walden has made a career running to places in the world that others would gladly flee, to share stories about life and death.

Walden didn’t intend to work in journalism, but she studied abroad in France during her junior year at Taft, which made her want to look at colleges overseas. She wound up at the University of Edinburgh,

where she studied Persian. Her love of languages and Middle Eastern history brought her to Beirut in 2015 to learn Arabic. Needing a job, she started writing for the local English language newspaper, *The Daily Star*.

Within a few years, she was running the national desk. “It was sometimes trial by fire and being in the deep end and a lot of feeling way in over my head,” Walden says, “but I guess that’s how you learn.”

One thing that paid dividends for her was a life-long love of languages. She speaks French fluently, her Farsi/Dari is advanced, she speaks some Arabic, reads Cyrillic, and can “get around in German, Spanish, and Italian.” Her polylingualism has enabled her to report stories about real issues faced by real people—not bureaucrats—such as Afghan refugees searching for warmth and security on the Pakistan



“At what point do you decide that this is too close, or this is too risky, when you’re already in a very risky situation?”

border, or the obsession among Iraqi youth with a mobile video game made by a Chinese tech giant.

After the pandemic, she accepted what she calls her first “grown-up” job in America in 2021 and moved to Washington. Her office was in the AFP’s North America bureau on K Street. For the first time, she got to experience the rush of a newsroom during a frenzied and exciting period—when AFP’s global readership wanted every bit of news that was coming out of Washington.

But her brief stint in the Washington press corps didn’t last long. War erupted, and with it a chance to cover a truly world-altering story.

“The crazy and naïve thing was that I was more afraid of just doing my job well [in Ukraine],” Walden says.

She flew to Warsaw and took a train to Kyiv, then another train filled with soldiers to Kramatorsk, not far from the front lines. She did much of her reporting from Bakhmut, a heavily battered eastern city, talking to civilians and volunteers hunkered down there. She embedded with a tank battalion traveling to the front, which was the only time she really felt conflicted about balancing her safety (and that of her team of photographers and video

journalists) and her journalistic responsibilities.

“The scariest thing for me was deciding: where do you draw a line?” Walden says. “It’s very hard to know. At what point do you decide that this is too close, or this is too risky, when you’re already in a very risky situation?”

During one particularly dicey moment, Walden found herself across the street from a “Grad,” or truck-mounted multiple rocket launcher, in the midst of an assault. The sound of the artillery cannon was less impressive than the *feeling* of it firing.

“I’ve never been near any kind of weapon that massive,” Walden says. “And when it fires, it just felt like I didn’t exist, like I was hollow. The whole feeling of the impact went right through me.”

She couldn’t help but think about the impact such a weapon could have on the other side. Then she was

Walden on assignment in spring 2024 visiting a UN project in a village in the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan with one of the UN’s armed Taliban escorts in the background



“Conflict reporting is something THAT I FIND IMPORTANT. IT’S VALUABLE TO HAVE SOMEBODY WHO’S REALLY COMING IN FROM THE OUTSIDE TO BE A WITNESS AND TELL HUMAN STORIES.”



told to leave the area immediately unless she wanted to experience the fearsome retaliatory force herself.

The risks of the assignment were made more evident in May 2023 when Walden’s colleague, an AFP correspondent named Arman Soldin, was killed by rocket fire near Bakhmut, the same city where Walden had been sent (she was not there at the time). “Another one of my friends who was working there was injured not long after,” Walden says. “He was lucky that the security consultant was there and could get a chest seal on him.”

It’s reasonable to wonder what compels a reporter to volunteer for an assignment at the nexus of a war. “Conflict reporting is something that I find important,” Walden says. “It’s valuable to have somebody who’s really coming in from the outside to be a witness and tell human stories.”

She says she met courageous, uplifting people simply trying to go about their lives, including doctors and teachers who refused to evacuate.

“It was a privilege to meet people and listen to them talk about why they were there and what they were feeling and what was important to them,” Walden says. “I would do it again.”

In Kabul, she is now trying to report on what daily life is like for the Afghan people and how rules are being enforced on the ground. In June, her team’s coverage of Afghans exiled from Pakistan was recognized by the Society of Publishers in Asia, the most prestigious journalism awards organization in the region.

She was drawn to the assignment partly because of the region’s fraught association with the United States.

“I was 13 when 9/11 happened,” Walden says. “It has such a place in our generation’s history that [I was attracted to] being able to see it and experience it, and also tell the next chapter of its story.”

At a time when fake news travels much faster and further than the truth, she says she feels fortunate that her wanderlust and penchant for languages led her toward a career as an international correspondent.

“There aren’t many jobs where you can see the world and meet people the way that you can in journalism,” Walden says. “I also think it’s a very important human trait that we share stories. The combination of that, for me, is perfect.” ■

Above: Walden, in Wilmington, Delaware, covers the Dominion v. Fox News defamation lawsuit for AFP.

Opposite page: Walden at the top of the ruins of the Shahr-e Zohak fortress near Bamiyan

Opposite page inset: Walden while on assignment in Ukraine, near Bakhmut in Donetsk in January 2023

Photographs provided by Susannah Walden '06.

Taft BULLETIN

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Airborne dancer during the Fall Dance Showcase in Bingham Auditorium.